



Hospitality – to make place at our tables

Hospitality. It sounds so wonderful and easy, so ordinary, like something people do in any case, of course. For many people the word ‘hospitality’ means to invite friends over for a meal, or like the word is used in the hotel industry, or *hospitality* industry. These associations are indeed part of the meaning of the word; yet the word has a much deeper, more promising and even dangerous meaning in the Christian faith.

Hospitality in the Bible

In both the Old and New Testaments there are important texts that deal with hospitality. A few that can be singled out, include:

- Genesis 18; where Abraham received three visitors and served them almost abundantly with griddlecakes and veal. One of the visitors then affirmed the promise of a son for Sarah and Abraham – it would now come true!
- Judges 19; that abominable story of the Levite and his concubine and how hospitality was shown to them as strangers. But the story ends in rape and murder and a terrible disregard of women’s human dignity. Hospitality can also be dangerous!
- The well-known story of the Good Samaritan in Matthew 22, Mark 12 and Luke 10 is eminently a story about hospitality.
- Roman 12:13 encourages believers: ‘Practise hospitality.’
- In Hebrew 13 we find the beautiful verse 2 that tells of people who showed hospitality to angels without knowing it.

These texts already clearly show that hospitality is an important theme in the Bible and that hospitality, according to the Bible, holds both surprises and horror. Yet it continues to be our

calling.

God as Host

Before we talk about the command and calling for believers to be hospitable, we first need to turn our thoughts to God, who he is and how he acts. According to the Old Testament our father, Abraham, was a wandering Aramean, a stranger and exile on this earth. (e.g. Deuteronomy 26:5). Abraham, and those of us who are, as believers, called children of Abraham, are only visitors here on earth, guests for an appointed time ... and God is our Host. This is where believers can start in their reflection on hospitality as calling, namely that God is the great Host on earth and we are his guests.

The table and hospitality

The theme of hospitality can be approached from so many viewpoints out of the Bible that a choice is made here for one possibility, namely the table.

Look at the picture. What do you see?

Yes, the perspective shifts constantly between one glass and the profiles of two faces looking at one another. Perhaps this picture is a good link between the table or cup on the (communion) table and the Christian virtue of hospitality. If we first focus only on Luke's two Bible books, we time and again in the Gospel of Luke find Jesus where he is at table with people, and in Acts it is the Holy Spirit that continues that work of Jesus. What do these table texts in Luke and Acts tell us about hospitality? What does it tell us about who Jesus is?

- In Luke 24 the story of the men of Emmaus shows us a Jesus who sits down to a meal, takes the bread, blesses, breaks and shares it. In the breaking of the bread they discover how Jesus, the risen Lord, is actually the Host of their table.
- Two chapters earlier, in Luke 22, we are told how Jesus in the darkest night imaginable institutes the Holy Communion. We can see afresh how the table has its origin in a difficult, challenging time, but is particularly also meant for such a time.
- The parable about the big meal in Luke 14 is particularly about hospitality, with the table as key symbol. At the end of the parable Luke shows us the table in the kingdom of God, but the guests at the table are, surprisingly enough, the poor, blind, cripple and lame. The last ones have the front seats at God's long table in his kingdom.
- In Luke 7, at the table of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus violates the prevailing rules of the time and includes a woman by allowing her to touch him. In the same manner Jesus also sits down at table and radically crosses boundaries by eating with a large number of tax collectors and other people at the house of Levi, the tax collector, so that the teachers of the law complained to his disciples, asking, 'Why does he eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'
- This violation of boundaries, this all-inclusive, radical hospitality of Jesus – a hospitality that allows us to see right into the heart of God – is proceeded in Acts by the work of the Holy Spirit where boundaries are further broken down and people collected at God's table. This is precisely the way in which the church grows – by the hospitality of Spirit-filled people who are already seated at the table. The first Christians are recognised by their hospitality.

To summarise: From Luke and Acts we can say that God is how He eats and that believers also are how they eat. Imagine a long, very long table where God himself is the Host. It is a table where people who we often would not expect to find there, take their places. Special places have been arranged – places of honour! – for the poor, blind, cripple and lame. And yes, in Luke’s Gospel Jesus indeed time and again eats with the Pharisees, exactly because he also cared for them. The long table of God’s hospitality is longer than we can imagine it for ourselves. It would seem as if we often find there precisely those people who we, in our thoughts, exclude from God’s table. Those that we deem last are first with God. God is how he eats, or rephrased, what his table looks like – his long table where, like we read in Luke 14, there always is “more place”.

These table manners of Jesus may currently just sound like a beautiful thought. But we must remember that it clashed absolutely with the boundaries of society in that time and also those present in any society of this day. Those who test and challenge these boundaries can, or rather will, bring upon themselves the wrath of others. Like one New Testament scholar rightly said, ‘Jesus was killed because of the way in which he ate.’

At table and on the way

In Luke 24 (Emmaus story) Cleopas and his co-traveller at table with the stranger discover that they are seated with no less a person than the risen Jesus as their Host. Their table is in fact his table. This discovery brings them into motion and they go and tell. But even more ... as the story proceeds in Acts we see that the believers not only tell, they themselves also begin setting tables and making place for others at their tables. Boundaries are crossed and people are included by true deeds of hospitality. As the believers in Acts ate and praised God in all simplicity and with joy, we read that God added to their numbers. In that first congregation it already became a characteristic of the church: Christ is the Host. But Jesus’ guests on earth, themselves also become hosts and hostesses in the service of God.

In Revelation 7 we find a vision where people from every nation, tribe, people and language stand before the throne of the Lamb. It is a vision that tells something of the day for which all believers hope, like the parable about the meal in the kingdom of God in Luke 14 also does. In some of the worship services of the early churches the communicants first of all tasted only milk and honey before they enjoyed the Holy Communion for the first time. Why? To remind them that all tables here on earth, important as they may be, are still only temporary.

God our Host is on the way with us – on the way to a table that he lays for us. And in the meantime the tables at our homes and in our congregations, and the way in which we show hospitality in this world, are an important foretaste on earth of God’s table that awaits us. Believers’ hospitality carries the taste of the milk and honey of the heavenly table upon which we hope – long tables that radically want to include especially those who are cast out by our society.

This is Christian hospitality – not only a beautiful thought – but also a virtue that at the same time transforms believers into guests and hosts/hostesses of God.

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